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Devin, Bree (2013) The legitimacy disconnect: Exploring the why and how of CSR communication. In *CSR and Communication: Extending the Agenda*, June 2013, London. (Unpublished)

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**The legitimacy disconnect: Exploring the why and how of CSR
communication**

Extended abstract submitted for the
International Communication Association Pre-Conference on

CSR and Communication: Extending the Agenda

London, UK, June 2013

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Extended Abstract

Whilst there is a growing body of research considering corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, calls have been made to consider the '*how*' of CSR communication (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010). The challenge with exploring this however, is that communication research has largely been criticised for failing to consider the macro-phenomena impacting communication (Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004; Lammers & Barbour, 2006). As such, limited attention has been given to who organisations need to indicate their responsiveness to in relation to CSR, and in turn, *why* they communicate about certain activities in their CSR reports. Without exploring these ideas, and hence, gaining an understanding of the macro-phenomena impacting CSR communication, we limit our understanding of the '*how*' of CSR communication. As such, this study sought to explore both the *why* of CSR communication, and in turn, the implications this may have for the *how* of CSR communication. To do this, this study drew on the notions of institutional theory, legitimacy, and rhetoric, and explored propositions drawn from these concepts to consider the *why* and *how* of CSR communication.

In order to consider the macro-phenomena in relation to CSR communication, and in turn explore the *why* of CSR communication, this study drew on institutional theory, which provided a macro-level theoretical frame to consider communication. Institutional theory has previously been used in communication research, and suggests that there are specific sources and broader contexts within an organisational field that create meaning in relation to CSR, and may assist in explaining *why* organisations communicate about their CSR practices. By drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) conceptualisation of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, and Scott's (1995; 2001; 2008) three 'pillars' that underlie institutional order: regulative, normative, and cognitive elements, this study argued that CSR, and in turn CSR communication, is influenced by regulatory, professional and public/mimetic sources.

Following an institutional theory perspective, the reason why organisations will respond to these regulatory, professional, and public/mimetic sources within their organisational fields is in order to appear or pursue legitimacy. This study drew on Suchman's (1995) conceptualisation of legitimacy, focusing specifically on the three types of legitimacy – pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. By drawing on previous work that highlighted the correlation between these types of legitimacy and each of the institutional pressures, this

study suggested that organisations engaging in CSR will respond to regulative sources in a bid to pursue pragmatic legitimacy, professional sources in a bid to seek professional legitimacy (which may be either pragmatic or moral in nature), and public/mimetic sources to pursue moral legitimacy. Here, it was also noted that once the social norms around CSR become institutionalised, cognitive legitimacy is generally sought. Together, the notion of institutional pressures and legitimacy can be used as a framework to consider the *why* of CSR communication, and in turn, the macro-phenomena impacting communication.

In order to consider the *how* of CSR communication, this study drew on rhetoric – focusing specifically on the rhetorical devices of logos, ethos, and pathos – which as Ihlen (2011) highlighted, is a useful starting point for those that wish to charter the terrain of textual CSR strategies. Furthermore, through rhetoric, actors shape the legitimacy of practices by making persuasive arguments that justify and rationalise these practices (Green, 2004; Green et al., 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). As such, rhetoric is highly useful in developing an understanding as to *how* and *why* organisations communicate about CSR in the way that they do. Drawing on Green's (2004) research which linked the rhetorical devices and the types of legitimacy, as well as an understanding of the rhetorical devices, this study highlighted that logos may be used to pursue pragmatic legitimacy; logos, ethos, and pathos to pursue professional legitimacy; and ethos and pathos to pursue moral legitimacy.

By highlighting the links between institutional pressures, legitimacy, and rhetoric, this study developed a theoretical model that suggested *why* organisations engage in CSR communication (institutional pressures and legitimacy), and well as *how* they communicate (rhetoric). This model highlighted that (a) logos may be used in relation to regulative sources (to seek pragmatic legitimacy), (b) logos, pathos, or ethos may be used in relation to professional pressures (to seek pragmatic legitimacy), and (c) ethos or pathos may be used in relation to public/mimetic sources.

In order to explore this theoretical model, this study took the form of a qualitative study, and drew on a case study methodology, within the specific context of a CSR report. By considering nine different organisations, from across three different industries, this research sought to explore the propositions alluded to in the literature, and consider both the *why* and *how* of CSR communication.

By exploring these propositions alluded to in the theoretical model, this study was able to shed light on the fact that while the actual act of performing an activity may entail one type of legitimacy (termed institutional legitimacy), the way in which that activity is then communicated about may imply a different type of legitimacy (termed strategic legitimacy). As such, the research found that there was often a disconnect between *why* the organisations were communicating about CSR activities in their reports (i.e. to appear legitimate in relation to the institutional pressures coming from the regulatory, professional, and public/mimetic sources), and *how* the organisations were communicating about CSR (i.e. in a way to pursue, manage, manipulate, foster, or negotiate legitimacy). The following table outlines the revised model based on the outcomes of this study.

Table 1. Propositions exploring the *why* and *how* of CSR communication

Sources (<i>why</i>)	Propositions	Institutional legitimacy	Strategic legitimacy	Rhetorical device (<i>how</i>)
Regulative sources	Original	Pragmatic legitimacy		Logos
	Revised	Pragmatic	Cognitive, pragmatic, and moral	Mainly logos , some ethos
Professional sources	Original	Professional legitimacy		Logos, ethos, and pathos
	Revised	Pragmatic	Cognitive, moral, and pragmatic	Logos and ethos
Public/mimetic sources	Original	Moral legitimacy		Ethos and pathos
	Revised	Pragmatic and cognitive	Moral and cognitive	Logos, ethos, and pathos.

Source: Devin (2013).

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